

HERE, IN THIS PLACE:
AN ESSAY COLLECTION

By

Meghan O'Dea

Sarah Einstein
Assistant Professor of English
(Committee Chair)

Sybil Baker
UC Foundation Associate Professor of English
(Committee Member)

Matthew Guy
Associate Professor of English
(Committee Member)

HERE, IN THIS PLACE:
AN ESSAY COLLECTION

By

Meghan O'Dea

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the University
of Tennessee at Chattanooga in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of the Degree of
Master of Arts: English

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Chattanooga, Tennessee

December 2016

Copyright © 2016 by Meghan O’Dea
All rights reserved

ABSTRACT:

The personal essay is difficult to define in part because of the diversity of structures and subjects that can fall under this category within creative nonfiction. Defining the form in terms of the fragment, specifically the fragment as it was envisioned by Romantic philosophers, acknowledges the contemporary personal essay's roots in both ancient literature and the *Essais* of Michel de Montaigne, as well as its modernist and postmodernist evolution. The creative portion of this thesis consists of a collection of essays by Meghan O'Dea entitled *Here, In This Place*. The introductory essay discusses how the theory of the fragment applies to both the structure and ethos of the personal essay as a literary form, and how defining the personal essay as fragment informed the writing of the essays included in this collection.

DEDICATION:

This work is dedicated to my partner and my home, Benny Chavarria II, who has tirelessly and generously supported my writing from the moment we met. This collection would not be possible without my parents, who have watched the writer in me unfurl since I was a child and have endlessly supported my craft, even when it takes me life in unexpected directions. Last but not least, this work is dedicated to the city of Chattanooga, which is a part of me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I owe a huge debt to Sarah Einstein for giving a rampant reader and nascent writer a foundation in literary nonfiction, sight unseen and in good faith. I am immensely grateful to Sybil Baker for believing in my early work, and for the chance to study in Hong Kong. I thank Matthew Guy for changing the way I think about some of my very favorite works. Thank you to Rebecca Jones for encouraging me to try new things on the page and thinking big.

I acknowledge that a version of “Making It Home” has been published previously by the *Washington Post* and that “I Fell Hard on Our Second Date” has been published previously by *Ink & Coda*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

ABSTRACT.....iv

DEDICATION.....v

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....vi

CHAPTER

1. INTRODUCTION.....1

2. HERE, IN THIS PLACE.....17

 In the Palace of Marriage and Commerce.....18

 Go West.....25

 Making It Home.....29

 I Fell Hard On Our Second Date.....32

 Now You See It.....34

 Downstream in Highland Park.....47

 Growing Up In the Gardens of the Dead.....53

REFERENCES.....62

VITA.....66

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The personal essay is a notoriously tricky thing to define in part because it is so diverse in structure, style, and subject. It is sometimes discussed in terms of any one or two of these aspects, or in terms of what it is not. Phillip Lopate suggests in his introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay* that the form is distinguished by its conversational use of language, which has “historically sought to puncture the stiffness of formal discourse with language that is casual, everyday, demotic, direct.” Yet he also points to the personal essay’s fixation on truth, nothing that “the struggle for honesty is central to the ethos of the personal essay.” Jill Talbot echoes these sentiments in *The Art of Friction*, explaining that she has always felt “that when I write essays, what I’m truly embarking upon is an exploration of answers I cannot possibly know, the conversations never allowed, the words unwilling to be shared” (7). Of the essays she has not yet written, she muses that “perhaps I am not ready to explore the truth of them” (8). John D’Agata calls the personal essay “an art form that tracks the evolution of consciousness as it rolls over the folds of a new idea, memory, or emotion.” But there is one term by which we can define the personal essay that encompasses its numerous aspects and makes space for all these definitions, and more. We can define the personal essay in terms of the literary fragment.

Though the personal essay has roots that extend as far back as Plutarch and Seneca in the West, and Sei Shōnagon and Kenko in the East, the form as we know it today is most directly

descended from the French Renaissance writings of Michel de Montaigne, who was an avid reader of numerous ancient works. As David Louis Sedley note “long before Montaigne went to Rome he knew ruins as the body of ancient literature that Renaissance scholars had incompletely reassembled and partially understood” (43). He was so inspired and fascinated by these fragments that he wrote bits and pieces of Greek and Latin literature on the ceiling of his study. “Surrounded by such fragments of antiquity,” Sedley explains, “Montaigne incorporated them into his work. Almost every essay includes ancient material cut and pasted into the French text. In this sense, each essay presents a ruin and the *Essais* as a whole represent the ruin of antiquity” (43-44). Baked into the origins of the personal essay as we know it today are Montaigne’s commitment to contemplation over dialectics and hard conclusions, his individualist interest in his own body and in-the-moment experiences, and his conversation with fragments of history, art, and knowledge that have survived the ravages of time.

This preoccupation with ruin and decay ran counter to the idea of immortality through art that was prevalent in other Renaissance literature, and was prescient of just how impermanent and unstable the world soon would be after the long medieval period. In between Montaigne’s *Essays* and the rise of the Romantics, Europe underwent fascinating and fragmenting changes. By the 1800s The French Revolution had toppled the monarchy and Napoleon was swiftly gathering Europe under his banner, even taking Alexandria, Egypt in 1799, the same year that the Jena contingent of German Romantics published the first issue of the *Atheneum Journal*. The Irish were rebelling against the British the same year as Wordsworth and Coleridge published *Lyrical Ballads*. The Haitians had shook colonial confidence seven years prior, an uprising that has inspired parts of Hegel’s philosophy as outlined in 1807’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. The fragment not only reflected the limitations of man’s memory and consciousness, but the political

state of Europe and a rapidly globalizing world. Friedrich von Schiller made a case for the fragment as a reflection of the modern era in 1794's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, which combined a Romantic philosophy of aesthetics, rooted in Kant's theories from earlier in the eighteenth century, with an examination of the events of the French Revolution and its aftermath. He described the plight of "Moderns" who found that "the image of the human species is projected in magnified form into separate individuals— but as fragments, not in different combinations" (575). The literary fragment was a reflection of the world, and modern man, on the page, as well as a stark reminder of what had come before, and of the certainty that the fragile present would one day give way to the future.

Friedrich Schlegel, scholar and seminal figure in the Romantic movement, once wrote that "many of the works of the ancients have become fragments. Many modern works are fragments as soon as they are written" (164). He founded the *Athenaeum Journal* in large part on this principle, and was fascinated with the way that literature, in an incomplete state, freed of definitive conclusion, could in structure mimic and explore the limitations of man's memory, spirituality, knowledge, artistry, and understanding. Indeed, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy explain in *The Literary Absolute*, "'fragments,' or what, in terms of form, amount to *essais* in the style of Montaigne, were already published in the eighteenth century and in Germany itself" (42), influencing the likes of Schlegel and his contemporaries. In turn, the Romantics re-influenced the personal essay in their preoccupation with the fragment as the literary form most representative of the contemporary moment and man's own perceptive limitations.

As Otabe Tanehisa points out, "the project and the fragment are each characterized by an intersection of what is present and what is absent, of the real and the ideal, and of completing (or

realizing) objectively and accomplishing (or idealizing) subjectively what is incomplete” (62). This extended not only to literature but to the individual life and history itself. In essence, the Romantic view of the universe was one of a fragment made up of many more smaller fragments, a structure still mirrored by the modern personal essay even hundreds of years later.

The modern personal essay has stayed true to its relationship with the Romantic fragment, serving as an abstracted and fragmented means by which the essayist can convey the individual in relation to the universal. The personal essay as we know it today has greater diversity of form than ever, from the academic formality one might find in, say, a work like Susan Sontag’s book review cum essay “The Ideal Husband,” to the driving lyricism and single sentence structure of Diane Seuss’ “I hoisted them, two drug dealers, I guess that’s what they were,” to hermit crab essays which borrow the form of other familiar documents and texts, like Jill Talbot’s “Wine List,” and beyond. The personal essay not only has a diversity of style, but also of architecture on the page, with possibilities for use of white space, section breaks, or incorporation of visual media or found artifacts. In this way the personal essay is not only a fragment in and of itself, but made up of fragments, mimicking the patterns of human thought, memory, and sense of self both in the moment and over time.

Take, for example, Ira Sukrungruang’s essay “The Wide Open Mouth,” in which sections are divided with capital Os, yawning and gaping in astonishment, worry, and sadness between memories of his father’s Minolta X-700, traveling with his then-wife to Thailand, spending time at the Buddhist temple, meeting the Queen, Eudora Welty’s thoughts on taking pictures, and finally his memory of his father the day he left the family. That is, the sections are divided by that uniform O in the essay as it is published in Sukrungruang’s collection *Southside Buddhist*. As it was originally published in *The Superstition Review*, the sections are simply marked with a

small, centered asterisk and wide swaths of white space, as is sufficient in many essays and for the needs of many publishers. The original version of the essay is, indeed, powerful. It juxtaposes the repeated image of a wide open mouth, collecting the mundane and emotionally powerful alike as united by a single facial expression. The essay builds these fragments into a meditation on family, love, and separation, a Minolta serving for inspiration as Tintern Abbey once served Wordsworth to contemplate memory, transformation, and the divine. Yet, as it stands in *Superstition*, the several carriage returns of white space buffering each asterisk from the surrounding prose emphasizes the gaps between these associated memories. They make the author's memory seem almost gauzy, and seem to broaden an already brutal amount of space between Sukrungruang and his family members, loved ones, crushes, between the United States and Thailand, between the reader and the narrated experiences. It slows the pace and urgency of the essay as the eye skims travels from section to section. It contributes little besides the punctuation of each section, a small star startling the reader out of one moment and into another.

As formatted in *Southside Buddhist*, those left-justified Os, bolded and hovering above each indented first sentence like a full moon seem to pull the prose back towards it, back to the beginning, back toward the essential. Their repetition throughout the essay underscores Sukrungruang's incantatory variations on the three words "wide," "open," and "mouth." He comes back again and again to moments when faces were fixed in this way. "The open mouth. My mother, when she napped, would occasionally have her mouth wide open. I called it the fly catcher..." he writes (51). Or take this anecdote: "One time, I was playing tennis for my high school team...when I saw the love of my life then— I don't recall her name, only her freckles— come to cheer me on after her choir practice. I stood wide-mouthed at the net...later, my doubles partner said, my mouth could've fit a planet" (ibid). In E.C. Salibian's review of *Southside*

Buddhist, she comments, too, on the effect of the Os included in this version of the essay: “The repetition of ‘O’ spreads visually across the pages like windows into blank space. Spoken aloud, the exclamation resonates in the body like grief.” The tight, compacted white space brings the reader in close to these minute memories. The O is a corral, attempting to contain a father who leaves, memories of the family as it once was, capturing these instances like the Minolta X-700 captures photographs.

What had seemed before a utilitarian separation of linked fragments was colored anew as architecture, borrowed from the poet’s toolkit. In a collection full of personal essays made up of fragmented memories, observations, and details, this one alone uses the device of the O. “Abridged Immigrant Narrative” is broken up with headings that read simply “Immigrant on the Run,” “Immigrant Love,” “Immigrant Joy,” etc. breaking down familiar archetypes, emotions, and rites of passage into their immigrant variation, separate and distinct from all other versions of these human experiences. “For the Novice Bird-Watcher” is sectioned with Roman numerals, lending it the air of a reference guide or science writing. These are deliberate choices that lend themselves not only to the architecture of each individual essay, but to the fragmented form of the personal essay itself.

Another example of how fragmentary form and subject are linked is Karrie Higgen’s essay “The Strange Flowers,” which guides the reader in connecting events and following narrative threads that are not only deeply personal, but also shaped by the author’s sensory processing disorders, bipolar, and epilepsy. There are leaps between times and places, between manic moments and depressive memories. Rather than trying to force the artifacts, memories, and observations she collects into a literary form with linear structure and logic, Higgens relies on the fragmented personal essay to convey the world as she perceives it and has experienced it.

In “The Strange Flowers” Higgins creates a collage of prose, legal documents, and an embedded Beyonce video. Rather than simply quoting a story she wrote in the second grade, from which the essay derives its title, Higgins scans it—the large block letters framed by blue lines on yellowed pages. We see where she bore down heavily with her pencil, emphasizing the word “not” in the sentence “I did not want people to laugh at me, so I tried to think of something to stop them from growing in my yard,” referring to flowers that a hypnotist would later suggest are a metaphor for her vagina, reframing her childhood story as a subconscious narrative of sexual abuse. She shares with us scanned fragments from a forty page transcript of a phone call her brother had with an underage girl, leading to his arrest. We see where certain words have been blacked out by a censor’s Sharpie. She includes a photograph of herself in elementary school, of her brother in his military uniform, a scan of charges filed by the Iowa District Court of Poweshiek County, of a newspaper column she wrote in the 1990s, of the visual warning label featured on the back of a blister pack of Accutane.

What is especially interesting is that Higgins not only blends her prose with these found artifacts and different types of language, but that she groups these fragments into sections within the essay, creating small collections within the larger whole. Higgins’ essay builds like a case study, deriving some of its structure and rhythm from legal, medical, and scientific writing, using her own personal memories, emotions, and thoughts as additional research that inform the larger work. She situates the essay in the context of both the Challenger explosion and the release of Beyonce’s 2013 single “XO,” placing her own narrative amidst other, more familiar texts with more universal reach. The section breaks serve to separate pieces of evidence, chronological moments, separate narrative incidents. They create white space to indicate jumps in time, in immediate subject, in geographic location. In such a fragmented, scattered essay that faithfully

follows the contours of Higgins' experience of memory and trauma as colored by her neurodivergent conditions, the white space and asterisks separating each section give the reader space within the essay to absorb, contemplate, connect, and empathize. The section breaks mimic the way that human beings, regardless of their neurological state, leap from association to association, creating meaning over a span of seconds, or decades.

Like Montaigne before her, Higgins incorporates fragments—though hers are from her own personal ruins, rather than Western antiquity. Sukrungruang, too, considers artifacts from his past. The epigraph to “The Wide Open Mouth”—itself a fragment from Albert Allard, “The Photographic Essay”—reads, “I don't find photographing the situation nearly as interesting as photographing the edges.” Sukrungruang sifts through the photographs his father took, trying to glimpse what truth lies just outside their borders and limitations. Indeed, when one considers the fragment, one must consider not only what is collected and preserved, but what is lost. Inherent to the theory of the fragment, and thus to the personal essay, is a sense of absence or loss. Often in the personal essay we must read between the lines, to participate with the author in the process of making meaning. Personal essays are often as much about what they leave out as what they include. They are not bound by linear chronology or even a linear path to truth.

Take, for example, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* or Jill Talbot's *The Way We Weren't*, which seek to understand what makes a story true, depending on a myriad of factors. Is the story the one we tell to others, or the one we tell to ourselves? When and where we are telling it? What details and emotions have changed over time? When working on the problem of honesty and truth, the personal essayist will be challenged by the limits of human memory, the way our feelings shift over time, how we evolve as humans and as storytellers. This comes across, too, in works like *Dispatches from the Drownings* that blend found reportage, creative

nonfiction essays in the style of that authentic journalism, and flat out fiction that also blends seamlessly into the collection. The personal essayist knows that truth is spatial— what it looks like depends on where you are standing.

Cities I've Never Lived In, an essay collection by Sara Majka, demonstrates this complex relationship with truth in creative nonfiction. Majka's work shows how the personal essay can function not only as a lyrical and flowing whole, without section breaks or much white space on the page. It also is indicative of how a seemingly cohesive, traditional narrative structure can function as a fragment when one considers the absence outside its borders. Majka's work contains both fragmented personal essays that begin, often, with a recollection or change of location and end without definitive resolution, but as a whole the book itself also remains unresolved. At first it seems to come full circle, returning to a character whose whereabouts were left untouched until the final essay of the collection. "There is one last story I have been trying to tell," Majka writes: "what happened to the man who ran away from his kids on the island." Yet the book finishes with the same ambiguity as many of the essays it contains, rooted in the doubt and distrust of memory that so often come up in creative nonfiction. Majka moves on from the man who ran away to another man who committed the same act of abandonment—her own father, who she speaks her mother about. "She said that after my father left us...he had gone to Boston" (158). Her mother once traveled to Boston after a letter she wrote to him went unanswered, but she found his home empty and boarded up. "I thought maybe I had the wrong house, or maybe I hadn't seen him at all" (160). Even an attempt at closure is snapped off and broken without concrete explanation. The characters are denied *the thing in and of itself* that they so relentlessly seek.

Cities I've Never Lived In consists of a series of essays that blur the line between fiction and nonfiction, between narrator and writer. The author's approach to creative nonfiction is not

the approach of Dinty Moore, who feels the art should fit the details, rather than the other way around, but more akin to the Romantic belief that truth was what we perceive it to be, even if we cannot prove it. Majka's work sits in that peculiar place perhaps best described by Baudelaire when he wrote that "properly speaking, romanticism lies neither in the subjects an artist chooses nor in his exact copying of truth, but in the way he feels" (52). *Cities* not only sits between genres and definite certainties, but between the places Majka has occupied and those she has not. She describes many cities—New York, Boston, Provincetown, Buffalo, Detroit, Iowa City, small towns in northern Maine— but the title of the collection instead emphasizes the negative space surrounding these named locations, not these places, but their unknown opposites. The interconnected essays are lyrical and gauzy, and specific not so much in geographic detail, but in describing what it feels like to be in a particular place, whether it is geographic or emotional. For example, Majka writes that "There was much about Buffalo that was difficult to put into words. It felt like a city that had been deserted and then, years later, been repopulated by the poor. Or maybe the poor had been in the city all along, but had waited to emerge" (111). Through the collection's very ambiguity, and the essays' abstractions, the reader gets the sense that familiarity with the specifics of a place and imagining the specifics of a place are not so very different. To some extent, a place is defined not so much by facts or truth, but by our perception of it, by the stories we tell.

Perhaps this is why so much of what feels immediate in these stories, when the reader feels most present with the narrator, are the narrative moments that take place on trains and buses, in cars driven between cities, and in rented, temporary homes just outside large metropolitan areas. The narrator seems to not fully occupy her life, to the extent we cannot distinguish between what is nonfiction and what is fiction, and she seems to not fully occupy any

one place. She admits that “later, when I kept going to cities—Louisville, Cincinnati, Columbus, Pittsburgh—but didn’t go to the soup kitchens anymore, it was East St. Louis that I thought of. I thought of St. Louis and East St. Louis, and of that thin, light-filled train that brought you from one side of the river to the other” (124). Always there is a gap between the place she exists in physically and the place she exists in mentally and emotionally.

That gap only serves to highlight the equivocation between the emotional state of the narrator and the physical space she occupies. Early on in the collection’s first essay “Reveron’s Dolls,” the narrator notes she “wasn’t well in the way that I would be several years later” (4), even as she describes a journey from Maine to New York on a train that “was dirty, with few people on it” (ibid). The scenery outside is bleak, passing “empty lots and warehouses” (ibid). When she leaves the city to go to Provincetown after her divorce, her ex-husband comes to visit. She observes feeling “like a caretaker showing a house that I loved but that had been more neglected than it ought to have been” (5). This leads her to consider her body under her coat and “ what it would feel like to take my coat off in the kitchen while he was there ” (ibid) subtly linking the idea of a neglected home to the idea of her body, ideas linked together by the presence of her ex-husband.

The narrator copes with a sense of malaise by traveling to poor, decrepit cities— rustbelt metropolises that, like her Provincetown rental, were once beautiful and great, but have since deteriorated. At one point she describes her “grand but decrepit” (37) marital apartment in a part of Portland, Maine, “that was known as resurgent, a description that carried more than a little wistfulness. We lived on the third floor of a building that looked vacant from the street. Even when climbing the central stairs...we felt an air of abandonment” (37-38). At this point in the collection, we already know that this is a marriage that will fail. The description of the apartment

comes in an essay about a missing, deceased young woman. Everywhere there are images of brokenness, from the apartment to the run down neighborhood to a marriage we know is doomed to a college student's life cut short. The characters throughout *Cities I've Never Lived In* are woefully lost. Tellingly, this essay that describes the apartment, "Wild Heart Bar," opens with the line "Years ago, I came across an article with the headline 'Local History Professor Caught Stealing Maps'" (37). One wonders what he might have been stealing them for, or what sort of maps they might be.

The people Majka writes about, including herself (especially herself) wander aimlessly in search of answers, or illumination, or that ephemeral thing the Romantics describe as *the thing in and of itself*. In the titular essay "Cities I Have Never Lived In" Majka's ill-conceived, incomplete tour of soup kitchens becomes a *dérive* in the tradition of the Situationists, wandering into cities but avoiding their tourist districts and "nice" parts of town in favor of those corners never described in travel guides. Even the book itself has a wandering quality, leaving the reader to do the tough work of sussing out the meaning and the connections, what ties the book together other than its mood and style and sense of determined aimlessness. If Higgins maps herself and her life on the page with startling specificity, Majka leaves a trail no more substantial than the dotted line that follows the little boy's route through his neighborhood in the old *Family Circus* cartoons. There are none of the section breaks or abstractions of form that Higgins and Sukrungruang use. Instead the vast geographic span of the collection, and the negative space implied by its title, serve to create a sense of distance between characters, between the narrator, herself, and the personae who may or may not represent her in the essays, and between the reader and the *thing in and of itself* that mimics the author's own sense of distance from truth.

That said, there is the paradoxical potential within the personal essay to simultaneously convey man's limitations of consciousness while also defining truth. The personal essay is capable of, as Majka demonstrates, defining cities in terms of her own absence, and in a sense describing somewhere she has never been. As Schlegel put it, "a fragment is a thought that is determined by itself and determines itself" (Tanehisa 61). Majka tells us the cities where she has lived, and we imagine other lives, other possibilities, other versions of events. Higgs finds order in the seeming chaos of the epileptic brain, and certainty in her perception and memories of events that editors and critics have shone doubt upon specifically because of her neurological conditions. Montaigne "communicates with antiquity through ignorance," Sedley explains (43). "Montaigne's sensitivity to ancient grandeur leads him to doubt. Montaigne's skepticism generates the ruined pattern of his sublime style; Montaigne degrades wonder as he elevates sublimity" (ibid). The personal essay generates its own logic. The personal essay defines itself by its borders, by its own internal process, precisely because it must simultaneously stand on its own as a discreet work of literature and hint at the larger remnants around its borders that either did not survive or did not make it onto the page.

Sarah Menkedick writes in her article "Narrative of Fragments" on the many fragments we modern readers and writers encounter daily, even outside the bounds of literary nonfiction or her particular focus, the lyric essay. She describes the distraction and ubiquity of the Internet as something almost mandatory. "To prove my worth," she writes, "and to participate in this ongoing communal construction of narrative, I have to bear witness to my own sensibility, presence, and consumption, and I have to do this via a bombardment of collagistic information." This is a sharp contrast to the non-lyric narratives she attempts to write when she gets down to it. "On the page I want to move forward step by step and scene by scene, developing my characters

and building a story not of fragments but of a continuous line, a complete vision.” The lyric essay is the bridge over the “complacency” of linear narrative and the trap of the essayist attempting to follow the example authors who create traditional, realist fiction. It links her own natural thought process to the digital world that, arguably, has been designed and organized in imitation of human thought. The lyric essay “unintentionally, unconsciously, I want to say – replicates the pre-eminent way of experiencing the world in the digital age,” Menkedick notes. In the postmodern era, the question of reality has only become more complicated, the nexus Schlegel describes between the real and the not real, the I and the not I, simultaneously larger and less firmly delineated.

While the literary fragment may have initially been drawn from surviving artifacts that were once part of longer poems, letters, and treatises, the form has since expanded to include examples on every scale. There are the very small fragments that break down even the simplest grammatical building blocks of an essay into fragments. Tim Bascom asks us to picture the personal essay and visualize the sentences in Judith Kitchen’s “Culloden,” which create an “impressionistic effect...being compressed to fragments, rid of the excess verbiage we expect in formal discourse: ‘Late afternoon. The sky hunkers down, presses, like a lover, against the land. Small sounds. A far sheep, faint barking. . . .’” Or you might consider the single-sentence structure of Diane Seuss’ “I hoisted them, two drug dealers, I guess that’s what they were,” which races breathlessly through a moment and the associations and memories branching off of it. On the opposite end of the spectrum, one can create a whole book of fragments, such as Roland Barthe’s *A Lover’s Discourse*, Maggie Nelson’s *Bluettes*, or David Shields’ *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*. In between are the fragments that break up essays like Montaigne’s and Higgens’, the section breaks that help us navigate the history and geography of Sukrungruang

and Majka's lives, not to mention prose poems, black out works that operate on the principle of palimpsest such as Tom Phillips *A Humument*, essay collections, and more. The definition of a fragment, as well as its scope and scale, is limited largely by imagination and perspective. This is, in part, why the personal essay has evolved into such a diverse and slippery form that is so difficult to neatly define.

At its heart, however, the personal essay has always been a fragment, whether it was Sei Shōnagon's observations on what she found hateful or Montaigne's letters addressed to no one. The essay has long ridden the line between intimacy and publicity, even fragmenting the author's identity depending on whether he or she is the reader, the writer, the self, or the observer of the self. To consider the personal essay in terms of the fragment is an exercise in intellectual cubism. Ann Lauterbach tackles the subject in the form of a prose poem entitled "Toward a Poetics of the Whole Fragment," discussing the fragment in a form that is itself fragmented, forcing the reader to make leaps across white space, dangle off line breaks and navigate enjambments:

"For a while I have been interested in the notion of a whole fragment. This fragment is not one in which one laments a lost whole, as in Stein, Eliot and Pound, but which acknowledges the fact of our unhandsome condition, where we suffer from having been being, and in that acknowledgment foreground, or privilege, what is: the abraded and indefinite accumulation of an infinite dispersal of sums."

Lauterbach succinctly explains the paradox of attempting to create complete collections of fragmented works, or to declare a fragmented work complete at all, including our own ongoing process of education and enlightenment.

The Romantic quest for *the thing in and of itself* is itself a fragment, doomed not to be incomplete by man's perceptive limitations, as well as his own mortality. Indeed, Maggie Nelson notes in a long list of different types of fragments she covered in a university course on the

subject that one was “life narrative as fragment,” or the idea that “we can’t see the whole until we’re dead, and then we can’t see it (pathos).” We are, and the world is, as Lauterbach puts it, “as is,” neither wholly incomplete nor wholly imperfect, and thus never entirely complete or perfect, either. The personal essay’s very structure belays this, as do the aggregate of memories, emotions, facts, observations, trysts, mistakes, history, horror, love, and death that the form has collected since its inception. The personal essay has endured and evolved, growing out of its Renaissance roots and Romantic influences in response to our continuing quest for truth, and our unchanged need to connect an ever expanding array of information into something we can comprehend and digest. It has found new relevance in the digital world and the postmodern era, and the literary fragment will endure as long as we desire to make connections.

CHAPTER 2
HERE, IN THIS PLACE

IN THE PALACE OF MARRIAGE AND COMMERCE

For a brief period in my mid-twenties, I worked in an office in the middle floor of what had once been Chattanooga, Tennessee's grandest department store. It had mostly been renovated into a hip, loft-vibe open office space full of glass and saturated off-primary paint colors, but my favorite part of the whole outfit was the old bridal salon in the far back corner of the building. The plasterwork was crumbling, revealing the lathe beneath, and the pieces that still clung to the studs and timber were covered in beautiful white and silver mylar wallpaper. Huge plaster cornices crowned the ceiling, and slender, simply ornamented columns held up the floors above, converted to expensive condominiums. I loved to stand amid the dirt and debris on the scarred hardwood floors, imagining away the old pool table and cardboard boxes and discarded desks and imagine the space in its heyday, full of chiffon and satin and tulle, the women walking away with candy-striped hat boxes and the sent of lilac and lavender in the air.

It was, by some metrics, the best job I'd ever had. I loved to get dressed in the morning and feel that I was putting on work clothes not just because it was required, but because the position deserved sleek pencil skirts and smart blouses. I loved to hear my high heels clicking on the marble lobby floor in the morning, and that I was able to take an elevator up to my floor. It was the soft echo of affirmation. Finally, there was the morning latte and the after-work martini, the downtown job. I took my credit cards out of my wallet and put them in my underwear drawer. I had managed to purchase a house the summer before, and now I actually felt I could afford it.

Working downtown meant that I could do without the car. The house was just a couple miles from the office, and the bus stopped at a dry cleaner's a few blocks from my front porch. I

donated the little blue Honda to NPR, because it wasn't worth enough to sell, because it seemed like the right thing to do. Each morning I boarded the Number Four with women uniformed for their own downtown jobs selling chicken salad sandwiches or cleaning floors or minding parking lots. There were men in construction uniforms or torn track pants, mothers minding quiet, wide-eyed toddlers, tired retirees making their way to the one grocery store downtown. The bus dropped me off in front of a coffee shop. It picked me up in front of the Electric Power Board headquarters, across from the park where men sat with bottles in brown paper bags. At the bus stop, women in house shoes sat anxiously holding the paperwork for their power bills.

I spent my days in a palace of commerce, typing on a computer given to me by the company, making calls on the cellphone they paid for, and on my breaks I would wander back to the old bridal salon and think of crinolines and lace, the trappings of cotillions and monied matches. I'd been single for two years, and I was getting used to telling myself this was my choice, that I was a career kind of girl. I was proud that I'd bought the house on my own, that I no longer had to negotiate to get my electricity turned back on, as I had during a particularly desperate summer of freelancing. I'd been broke, but I'd never been poor, just as by some metrics I've made it, and yet had always felt so far behind, just as I was single, but insisted I was not lonely.



A few months before I turned eighteen, after I had dropped out of prep school, after I'd gone to live at the hippie commune, I had the opportunity to join some of my new friends on an expedition to Virginia to protest the logging of a beloved knob. We drove up I-75 listening to the Grateful Dead and Fugazi and a few hours later settled in to the Clinch River watershed to stage a tree-sit. At Forest Action Camp I was introduced to a group of crusty punks from Asheville,

who had dropped out of the mainstream to hop trains, squat in houses, and dumpster dive. One girl, called Wren, had beautifully embroidered her black, thrifted clothes with patches from Southern punk bands and in the shape of little birds, like her name. One side of her head was shaved, and she wore combat boots with a ripped black skirt. She and her friends worked only when they wanted to, or when they needed to, and traveled seasonally with their dogs, going everywhere from Philadelphia to Mexico. I'd read *On the Road*, but this was a whole new level of stepping away from the status quo. I'd never known anyone before who was voluntarily homeless, who was so utterly disconnected.

The *Free Lance-Star* sent out a reporter to interview the activists who'd convened from near and far, from organizations as diverse as Katuah Earth First! and the Ruffled Grouse Society. One declared to the paper that he would put his life on the line, if necessary. I met a group of other women for a female-only climbing clinic that morning, before the reporter came down the hill to speak with us. Later, I found myself in print, suggesting "the government could make more money from supporting recreation in the forest." I was described as "18 year old Meghan O'Dea...dangling from a poplar tree in her climber's harness." My economic expertise was as limited as one might expect of a middle-class high school drop out who had fled prep school to protest capitalism in rural Appalachia. I had all the naiveté of one whose education in finance consisted of receiving paychecks from a suburban movie theater and skimming *The Communist Manifesto*.

Back then I wanted to be Julia Butterfly Hill or Alanis Morissette— choosing to skip the dichotomy of career versus motherhood for something grander, more political, certainly subversive. I wanted to commit to a cause, to intellect, to art. I cut my hair short at sixteen because I didn't want to risk be beautiful, I wanted to be noticed for everything just under the

surface. I wore board shorts and baggie concert t-shirts. I annoyed everyone I knew with my knowledge of which gas stations were owned by liberal corporations that donated their money to blue causes. I didn't want a life in the sense of hanging out in parking lots furtively smoking menthols, or driving cars around to try and crush garbage in a parking lot with the right front tire, or drinking underage in the dorm rooms of college boys, but I did want a political life, because a political life meant I mattered. It meant I was working for something. It seemed equally likely that I could end the Iraq War as get a date, but at least this was a process that involved my wits, that expanded beyond the limits of my hometown. There was a moral righteousness to it, a whiff of the adult. There was an access to office supplies that turned me on more than the free condoms my friends and I picked up from pride parades. A man could change my life, but I could change the world.



After I started taking the bus to work, I started meeting the women with nowhere to go. They didn't ask for help like the panhandlers and drifters and alcoholics, or with the practiced nonchalance of the chronically homeless. They couldn't make eye contact, kept their eyes on the ground. They rarely had a bag or a purse, or even a sweater. They had runny noses and eyes red with crying. They didn't know the ropes of the local tent cities, or where the homeless shelters were. I'd wait at the bus stop with them, pulling up the numbers of the single sex safe houses, of the churches that offered a hot meal, with addresses and what bus routes would take you there. I drew maps on the back of receipts. Once, I offered up my own phone number.

The Number Four rolled up and took me back to my house, where I changed into my pajamas and poured boxed wine into a mason jar and flicked on the TV. I waited for the phone to ring. I cooked dinner from my CSA vegetables, keeping an eye on the screen I'd set within arm's

reach on the counter. I went to bed. I lay there and wondered what my strategy would be. What place would I go to stay safe if I had run out of options? Would I hop a train? Sleep under an overpass? How different would it be than all those years ago when I'd spent the summer in a one-man tent on the side of a mountain, than when I'd shared a grilled roadkill beaver with the crusty punks by a campfire, than when I'd gone dumpster diving with my mother on a lark?



I remember the month we ran out of money in the ninth grade. I was about to purchase a pair of pants online when my mother told me my allowance would have to wait. Everything would, in fact. She went to the grocery store, bought enough food to last for the next three weeks, and that was it. We weren't going to spend a penny more except on gas. Somehow, my parents had done the math wrong. Depending on how you looked at it, they'd done the math wrong ever since they decided to send me to private schools we couldn't quite afford. It's also subjective whether the math was right or wrong on their decision to have only one child, in order to allow for all the other calculations that followed, financial, emotional, familial. Either way, it was the first time I fully felt the difference between my family and those of my classmates, who lived in pricier zip codes, whose parents drove SUVs, who had siblings spread out across different grades of the same expensive schools.



A few years after I left the palace of commerce for good and started freelancing, a girl I'd gone to high school with, who had been a few years ahead of me in school, started living in one of the apartments in that same once-upon-a-time department store. I recognized the shape of the windows from her photos online, as she documented a rapid meeting and marriage to an entrepreneur, the renovation of the home her parents had bought her to share with her first

husband, the birth of her first child. She talked about the bar down the street and overhearing the noises of all those late night revelers outside the cozy confines of her marriage bed, baby within arm's reach. The bar where I, too, once had more than a few beers most nights after work, where I wrote furiously for the paper documenting the ins and outs of twenty something life, where I could keep an eye on the bus stop across the street to make sure I caught the last one home.

“As I try to fall asleep,” she wrote alongside a photo of her new, bonneted baby, “I think ‘I used to be out there.’ And ‘out there’ means so much.” She recalls the scraped, neon nights chasing gas station closing times to score one last six-pack, and now she stands inside the safe and comfortable walls of a marriage, no longer outside on the street sick and sore. It means many different things to me, this idea of who is inside and outside a marriage and motherhood, of who fits in and who doesn't, of who is on the street and who is out of their minds. It is so loaded, this thing, this sentence, this attempt to position a life lived adjacent to an old bridal salon a few floors up from a palace of commerce. To understand what it is to be there, in the apartment bought with the money her father made made from decades of selling new cars. To have grown up eating the pot likker greens invented by this place's poor, and to make them still in kitchens rimmed with marble countertops.

I thought back to those afternoons watching bands of sunlight strike the dust motes in that old bridal salon, standing amidst the corporate detritus, the leavings of capitalism, the cast off keyboards and cardboard boxes and USB keys. I thought about how happiness is an accident. It is not something I could walk into like a marble lobby, or purchase on sale for free shipping with a few clicks of a mouse. It is not something that comes wrapped in tulle and taffeta, glittering like rose gold. It is also a fallacy to think one can find it by eschewing all that, that it exists for enlightened vagabonds in out of the axel grease corners, in the underbrush at twilight, in tent

cities where want has created a moral superiority. I didn't earn this happiness. It is not a place to arrive, as I so often thought.

For all I grew up on the promise of a room of one's own, of my own economic potential, I discovered I could access the space, could earn the money, and yet be left twirling in the empty spaces voided by dreams deferred. I was haunted by the old rotunda at my high school, a place imbued with the inheritance of old Southern values, with a belief in a certain kind of womanhood. I felt myself still as a bird in the poplar tree where I could have sacrificed myself to beautiful impossibilities. I was possessed by those bus stops, rife with uncertain evenings looming in front of scared women whose lives are both like and unlike my own, separated by scant chances, yes, but also a string of choices made by men and women long before us. I still stood in that palace of commerce, dreaming two dreams, the old and the new, hers and mine. I found myself standing in uncharted territory, trying to learn to make space for all that I am.

GO WEST

With the exception of one, the men I dated who proved impermanent have all headed west. Only one grew up here, like me. Some of them came from elsewhere, and happened to be in my city long enough for us to meet and give it a go. The angry one, who crash landed here in middle school from Mequon, Wisconsin. The slender one with the voice that broke just so, who had the kind of rural Midwestern upbringing that involved long late night drives to see *Rocky Horror Picture Show* and a deep knowledge of German-descended county fair cuisine. The guilty pastor's son who grew up on an Indian reservation in Yakimaw. And me, the Southern daughter of two Yankees, who traveled up I-75 each summer to spend a weekend at my grandfather's house in a small bedroom town between Buffalo and Rochester, not far at all from Lake Erie.

I always dreamed some man would take me to the big city on the back of a small motorcycle. This was how it was always done in songs. The man was the goal, the city was the goal, and the motorcycle was a thin delicate hyphen connecting this place I knew so well to unfinished sentence waiting to be written on the other side of these mountains. But I drove my daddy's pickup truck, and my first boyfriend—the one who was from here, too—he drove his mother's old minivan. It was with him I'd fantasized about an apartment in Harlem or Morningside Heights, because young women with ambition were supposed to move to New York, and that became his dream too because he didn't know what else to do. Our fantasy did not include minivans or children, no soggy noses or spilled oatmeal. It involved impressive careers and regular dinner parties, with good dishes, and each of us wearing smart sweaters.

I never made it to New York and we never made it down the aisle and I hear he lives in Las Vegas now, where the roads cut straight through the desert in neat gridlock lines that make following directions very easy. He took the same path west I remember from my lessons about the Oregon Trail, stopping in St. Louis for law school and eventually making his way further and further out into new territory. Meanwhile I stayed in Tennessee where the roads switchback up mountains and kudzu obscures the view and you never know what weather is on the way because the topography keeps you from seeing too far ahead in any one direction. I only know a storm is coming when I sit on the porch and it blows in from over the funeral home across the street, from down off the plateau, and minutes before the sheets of water blow down you can see the clouds build up and drop from greater heights. You can see the water vapor in them grow heavy.

I almost moved up there two years ago, up to a small town on the plateau ruled by a large church, one of the Southern evangelical sects that does not believe in sex and does believe in guilt. I almost moved to a dry county where the students of the local Christian college smoke cigarettes just off campus in a playground lined with damp mulch that hides the butts and obscures the odor. I almost moved there for a man who needed to be forgiven for imagining his god differently than he had as a child. He judged me for not judging him. I wanted to fit myself into his small town, into his close-knit world of college friends, and so I regularly fit myself into his yellow sports car and we drove up the highway to his place. On Sundays I sat with him in the small room in a little strip mall where his church was located, and afterwards we'd have lunch at Cracker Barrel. On rare nights in Chattanooga he'd take me out to a restaurant with good fried chicken, the breasts and thighs brined in salty sweet tea before it was dredged in flour and plunged into hot oil like the martyrs and saints after, or before, they were broken into small sacred pieces. I never felt so Southern as I did back then.

Part of the appeal was that he wanted a motorcycle and he said he wanted to go back to Denver. He'd tell me stories about when he lived in a rental cabin high up on a hill that his sports car could barely manage, surreal stories involving encountering a moose with one eye standing in his driveway, the other eye dangling from its socket. But he never did buy that motorcycle, and he never did go back to Denver— something about an ex fiancé who had tried to follow him to Tennessee, who even geographical distance could not dissuade after he ended things.

We never even went out of town, except a few times for a concert and a tattoo, two hours north from his place to Tennessee's worst major city. Knoxville is not as big or interesting as Nashville and Atlanta, which were places he explicitly refused to visit with me, though he often went on his own. There was no room on that imaginary bike with all that baggage. He made it out all right— I hear he went to London for a while, and now he lives in Oakland with a girl. Now that Southern boy from Yakimaw is back to the other place he's from—out west—and I hope it gave him balance. I hope it gives him peace.

So I stayed here, in the town which the angry boy from Mequon never left— remembering the way I throbbed deer-still in the coffee shop where I saw him for the first time in years, feeling old fear. I stay here, in a house a few blocks from the one my third boyfriend owned with his ex-wife, which he was trying to sell the winter we were together. I felt the mountains tight like a ring. Here I am, I thought, here in a city full of Civil War monuments and love affair landmarks. All bottled up like the Tennessee River behind the Nickajack dam.

Some of the kids I knew in high school came back from big cities and made a life like the one they had known as children. They picked up and set down Morningside Heights and Chicago dressing rooms and Detroit ERs as if they were toy boats or paper hats. These cities, for them, were as temporary as the men with whom I spent my twenties. This was where they wanted to

be—deep down, all along. So I watched sunsets, waiting for the colors to peak around the edges of the mountains and the clouds. I waited for summer storms to scream down off the plateau. I sat on the porch and drank bourbon. I watched the men go west. I tried to be a part of this place.

MAKING IT HOME

Throughout my twenties, when I was in a bad place emotionally, I often blamed it on being in the wrong place physically.

I could set up camp anywhere and disburse just as quickly. I spent the decade in borrowed places—in dorms, in hostels, in rented rooms and a couple summers in a former vicarage. My friends and I partied at our parents' places, in badly run basement bars, in cramped one-bedrooms and at state parks. I worked in library carrels, cramped cubicles and at any available seat I could find in a coffeehouse. I conducted a few relationships that began at happy hours, gallery hops, and concert halls, and eventually moved on to couches, cars, and hotel rooms. I also spent a lot of time alone in my dingy apartment. I traveled at least once a year, but I never moved out of my small Southern home town.

I often wondered where I belonged.

I kept telling myself I would move to a better, more exciting, more compatible city as soon as my lease was up. When the time came there was always some reason — a job, a man, an empty bank account — to simultaneously stay put and stay unrooted. I expanded my online dating profile, first to statewide, then regional and eventually to encompass the whole country. I imagined what life would be like in a blue state with good bands and someone to see them with — perhaps living in the soft woods of Vermont or the funky dampness of the Pacific Northwest.

At twenty six, I met someone new. He didn't like to spend time at my apartment, or even in the city where I lived and we worked. Instead, I often drove forty minutes to spend nights and weekends at the house where he rented an attic from friends. These friends, who were engaged to

be married, were slowly fixing up the place. The renovations mapped on the joists and studs of the house anticipated the trajectory of their lives, setting intentions for a life they would share. That year they tore out the kitchen tile and paved the back driveway in heavy stones. Two more old friends moved in, finding their feet after several years abroad. There was always enough room. The house held large potluck dinners, holiday fetes and, on one memorable occasion, a basement dance party. By the end of the year, it contained a new baby.

It was the first time I'd known anyone who had that kind of space to offer. I also knew there wasn't remotely the same square footage in my relationship. He made a point of not sharing the key code to the house, despite how often I was there. He disappeared on holidays to attend other parties a few blocks away. Once, at a concert we planned to see together, he sat a couple rows ahead, having purchased a ticket in a more expensive section.

The weekend after we broke up, I flew to my grandfather's house. It's the one place I've always been able to go back to; the houses of my childhood and high school years, by contrast, have long since been sold. I felt a pang knowing I wouldn't be spending much time at that big old house where I'd spent the better part of a year. And in those pangs, I knew for the first time what I really wanted. It wasn't the men that I missed. It was a place to call my own.

A month later, I bought a house.

I was lucky to have money left over from my college fund. My parents had turned it over to me a few years earlier with instructions that it was for graduate school, a down payment or a wedding. "Don't pick the wedding," my mother advised. "It's just one day."

Instead, I bought a small century-old bungalow with a monthly payment I could manage on my modest salary. I painted the walls and invited friends over for dinner. I repaired the plumbing myself, arranged my furniture and removed hair from the drain. I pulled up the bushes

in the front yard, putting flowers in their place. When friends needed somewhere to land, there was a room to offer. I slowly stopped looking toward the future, wondering who I would be if I were only somewhere else. I chose the person I am over the men I might meet. Instead of haunting borrowed places, waiting for an invitation, I made space for the friends and family I loved.

In the years that followed, I often felt lonely but never entirely alone. There were pets, a roommate and constant visitors. But there was also the house itself, which gave my life a new sense of certainty. Of course calamity could strike. Boyfriends or husbands could walk out; companies can fold; buildings can burn to the ground. But for the first time, I began to suspect that I could care for myself. That place is something you make, instead of somewhere you find.

I FELL HARD ON OUR SECOND DATE

I set my left foot down on a loose spot of loam on our way down a gorge in the Cumberland Mountains, and the tree roots holding the dirt together were not enough. Mid sentence I was in the air, diagonal and trying to direct the traffic of my own body moving through space, to clear myself for landing.

It was not the kind of falling described in breathless pop songs, or the brave, ecstatic leap into the unknown that women's magazines recommend as an antidote to anxiety. It was, instead, a simple act of gravity.

He tells me I screamed, briefly. It was not the scream of an ingenue already angling for her next part. I don't remember making a sound, but it must have been as much out of surprise as a sense of danger. For such a long time it seemed as if I were simply dangling. I saw him throw his backpack aside, the little blue one holding our water, snacks, and cellphones, a length of rope. It held, too, a pretty rock we had found earlier up on the bluff where the butterflies landed on my arms and shoulders.

"The butterflies were flirting with you," he had said.

"I don't think I can do this," I told him.

He had flown from Dallas a month after we'd met, specifically to go hiking with me. The timing was all wrong. In two days I would fly to Europe for a month, then to Western New York.

I saw him dive over the side of the cliff like a swimmer, and that was when I started to fall in earnest, no longer held up by the density of my own surprise. My ulna hit the dirt first, and I learned how flexible bone can be, the lengths we will go to avoid breaking, the way we can spread a trauma out around us so we do not feel it so acutely.

There is a gap between giving yourself over to the forces acting on your body and when your body registers what has been done. In roughly half the time it took me to fall, my arm began to swell. My body sprung up off the ground, refusing it, and gravity pulled me around onto my back and down. There was nothing to catch, there were no sticks to grab, there was no brush or vegetation, nothing but gravel going by and rocks and the trees above so far away and suddenly I heard him hit, I heard him hit the ground hard, and I saw his ribs catching the bend of the hill the way my ulna had caught the limestone shelf up above, and I heard the air go out of his body.

In between my first and second landings, he aimed himself to where I was likely impact, performing minute, spontaneous calculations. There was resignation, there was the release, there was the acceptance of gravity, and it all took so little time, but suddenly he was there, and his hands were behind my shoulders and his arms were catching my head and it was deliverance, it was a little like being born.

NOW YOU SEE IT

In Dallas we couldn't get good service at a bar no matter what we tried. Benny would go up to the counter himself, credit card already poised between his index and middle fingers. I would go up with him, standing demurely just behind him, making conversation while tall, broad bros in baseball caps pressed in front of him, or girls with long hair extensions and expensive bohemian dresses skipped ahead, sure no one would call them out. We tried it where Benny would give me the card at the table and he'd follow my lead as we approached the register. Whatever our plan of attack, the bartenders would ignore us until several other patrons had tabbed out.

This happened at the hip craft brewery where you could play darts and Bermuda ring toss amidst the beer tanks and pallets of shrink wrapped cans. This happened at the bougie downtown beer garden where giant fans would blow cooling mist over you and Hispanic waiters would bring the white patrons margaritas with tiny bottles of Corona upended into them, drinks that look for all the world like a schoolboy dunked into a trashcan by bigger, stronger boys, feet kicking as they walk away laughing. At an old haunt of Benny's, an eclectically decorated shotgun dive, we had trouble getting our drinks thanks to an old nemesis who now tended bar, causing us to shrink to the back wall by the bathrooms. Everywhere we went that day, we were practically invisible.

"Money talks in this town," Benny said. "I look Mexican, so they assume I don't have any." I could see his point. He's obviously not white— short with deep brown eyes and a broad nose and high, flat cheekbones. He was wearing what he almost always wears, a t-shirt, shorts, and worn ball cap that made him look more ready for a day building a deck than barhopping with

his new girlfriend. I'm used to this. He works in restaurants, the kind we could only afford for an anniversary or a birthday. He goes to work each day in a pressed black button-down and good black slacks, his Italian leather shoes shiny and sharp. On his days off, he likes to be comfortable, doing something with his hands, whether it's splitting wood or playing the piano. There's no sartorial middle ground between work and play, especially on a Dallas summer day when the temperatures are going to hit triple digits. I'm wearing a sun dress and I've actually put on makeup and jewelry. I haven't seen Benny in a couple weeks, because I'm not from Texas. I'm living in Western New York for the summer, and we've only been dating a few months. We're still getting to know one another and I still want to impress him.

He wants to impress me too. He wants to show me his city, make sure I have a good time, pay for everything so I can see he's not like the other guys I've dated, the ones who didn't have jobs, who didn't want to give me the time of day, the ones who wouldn't grow up. That's why we're spending the day checking out different places he likes, different neighborhoods that remind him to tell me stories from the past fifteen years he's been running around Dallas with his brother and his band, playing shows and getting into a little trouble, dating around, getting his wiggles out, living life. It's making him angry that we can't get service. He's embarrassed that these bartenders are making it difficult to show me a good time. He's frustrated they're making him feel small just because he doesn't care about his looks, just because he looks brown, just because he looks broke. It doesn't matter when I walk up with the credit card. They've seen me with him.



I've warned Benny how it will be when he moves to Tennessee. That we don't have a context for Hispanic people there, because they aren't seen. They work janitor jobs or are tucked

into kitchens bussing tables. They're in the service industry, but the part where you never see them serving you. In Dallas, Benny was invisible to bartenders until more affluent people were taken care of. In Chattanooga, people who look like him are just plain invisible, period. By and large they stick to their own churches, restaurants, and shops. Some are illegal, or worried they'll be treated as such, and they keep their heads down. White people don't go into their places. They don't even know where most of them are.

There's only a couple *carnicerias* that have white customers. They're on the border between streets that have been gentrified and those that are still hood. It's safe and exotic to purchase avocados there, or *plátano* flavor popsicles. The burritos they have in the back cafeteria are cheap and tasty. In high school my tutor took me to La Altena to test out my Spanish conversation skills. Could I shop without speaking in English? Order a meal *en español*? Sure. But my vocabulary didn't include shooting the shit, ribbing a little, fast gossip, or making friends.



While Benny is in town for a job interview, he walks into a nice downtown bar that serves seafood and something called a Geisha martini, made with lychee liqueur, and he is wearing his best suit for a job interview at an even fancier bistro across the street. No one says anything overt, but he can tell they're staring. He tells me about it on the phone. I tell him no one is going to know what to make of us. I have my own reputation in town, I tell him. People think I hate men, because I wrote about feminism for years in the local paper. "This is the South," I say. "I know how it is to stand out." I'm not sure what else to say.

The truth is that the ways in which I stand out are largely a choice. In high school I dyed my hair blue and wore punk jewelry, because standing out was the point. I wanted to reject the

South far more than it ever wanted to reject me. In college I got tattoos, carefully placed so they wouldn't be revealed by my professional wardrobe, but could be shown off in shorts and a swimsuit top diving off rocks at one of Tennessee's many blue holes tucked in the mountains. In my twenties, I chose to write publicly, unapologetically about controversial topics. I let myself be angry. I put myself out there. I drew a circle around myself like a spell, a protective barrier, a demarcation of my territory of belief and that which was outside my beliefs. It was a sacred ring, but it was a line in the sand all the same.

Later, once Benny has moved to Chattanooga, we will go to see *Straight Outta Compton* and he will tell me about his childhood visits to the Oak Cliff part of Dallas, which in the 1990s was not all that dissimilar from Compton. He will admit that if anything in our relationship is hurdle to overcome, it is that I can't understand his experiences, the way he's treated. The gulf of privilege between us. We sleep skin to skin at night, stubbornly embracing even when it means cutting off circulation to arms and legs, or cricks in our necks that we massage out in the morning. Yet sometimes there is a chain link fence between us. When people look at us together, they see the barb wire of Tijuana, the natural expanse of a brutal desert, the red line of the mortgage lender, the bus line presumed to stretch between our neighborhoods, our countries, our commonalities.

When we look at one another we see wide open space, the farm we want to buy one day where we can grow food, play loud piano music, build a home, put our hands in the dirt. I see the choice Benny made to move here, out of Oak Cliff, out of Dallas, to a place where so few people look like him. When we stand together, it pulls Benny sharply into view. He cannot be ignored. This is a choice I make, that calls attention to us both.



In 2014, the *Times Free Press* announced that “Chattanooga’s Hispanic population more than tripled between 2000 and 2010.” Of major U.S. cities who have seen a rise their Hispanic demographics, Chattanooga ranks number three, but big growth doesn’t add up to big numbers. “Of about 168,000 residents, 9,891 are Hispanic” writes reporter Kevin Hardy. That’s about 6% of the population. Compare that to a population of 34.9% African American and 58% white as of 2010. There’s history here of racism against blacks. Our beautiful, famous Walnut Street bridge was the site of a lynching in 1906. People may very well feel racist towards Hispanics. But there’s less precedent for how that might play out. People here are still making up their minds.

A couple months after he gets the job at the fancy bistro, Benny’s customers are sometimes visibly baffled when he comes to take their wine order. They aren’t used to seeing people who look him at the beginning of the meal, only later when there are half-full plates to be cleared away with dirty napkins perched on top.

One evening, a middle aged woman asks him where he’s from. He tells her that he’s from Texas, but she keeps pressing him until he explains that his hometown is a little country town called Cash that few people have heard of.

“You’re from another country?” she asked, misunderstanding.

“No m’am. Just *the country*.”

“Oh. So you’re parents must be farmers, then.” Her husband is growing visibly uncomfortable with her insistence on interrogating their waiter about his personal history.

“Actually they live in Chicago. They’re urban planners. They run the public transit system up there. My mother just wanted a simpler life for us kids when we were little.” She lets it go after that. The rest of the evening, her husband speaks for both of them when Benny comes to check on how they are enjoying their meal.



We're at a downtown pool hall frequented by college students. It's almost midnight, and he's in his all black suit, fresh from serving, and I'm in my best dress. We're too fancy for this place but I've just gotten done at a college alumni fundraising gala, and we are meeting close friend here for her goodbye party. We walk up to the bar to order, and I start. The bartender looks at us strangely and seems to think I've taken pity on a bus boy who doesn't speak much English. He doesn't see we're a couple. We've broken too many rules. I ordered my own drinks instead of being a lady and letting him do it for me. We're dressed too well. I'm white and he's not. The bartender is confused, and it plays out in the service. It takes forever to make a couple well drinks, even though this is the secondary bar and he doesn't have many customers. A well-meaning friend loans Benny a zip up jacket to sling over his suit, but it swallows him whole. He's gone from looking like the help to looking like he doesn't have a home. There's an expression on his face I haven't seen before, and Benny quietly turns and heads out the door, keys jangling in his pocket. An hour later, he reappears in a Jimi Hendrix t-shirt and his favorite ball cap, thoroughly himself once again.



This isn't Dallas, where there's a major Hispanic population and enough in-state border towns that the fearful get xenophobic. As of 2010, census workers had marked down 2,368,139 Dallasites who identified as Hispanic. The numbers aren't vast in comparison to other parts of the southern United States, but they are significant. The same year North Carolina was home to 828,210 Hispanic residents, Georgia to 879,858. These are the migrant farm workers, the factory workers packaging pickles, the construction workers and kitchen staff building the large, gleaming office parks that house Durham and Raleigh and Atlanta's financial and tech sectors,

who put in shifts at the hospitals and universities that are otherwise off limits. 43% of North Carolina's Hispanic population is uninsured, 45% in Georgia, according to Pew Research.

Tennessee is slim by comparison, with 296,000 Latinos, 27th in the nation. Here, too, they stick to the rural areas, to agriculture and the small towns where low-skill jobs are available on a right to work basis. 40% of Tennessee's Hispanic population lives in poverty. Forty minutes away in Dalton, Georgia is the highest concentration of Latinos in the area. Dalton has two primary demographics: the people of color who make the carpets, and the white people who own the carpet mills. As you drive down I-75, you will see these factories on the side of the road. One of the largest, Mowhawk Industries, is named for an Indian tribe indigenous to what is now upstate New York, part of the Iroquois nation. Since the 1950s the company has slowly moved its operations into Georgia, where labor is cheap and unions aren't strong, and slowly the Latino workers have come here to make berber and laminate and frieze. The factories sit on land that was once home to the Creek Nation, and later the Cherokee. This is a land of migration, crisscrossed with trails to and from.



At the private elementary school I attended, most of the other children were white. There were a few Asian Indians, a couple black kids, and one Hispanic boy. He was my best friend up until senior year of high school, at which point we'd grown up and grown apart. But throughout middle school I was invited to his house for family dinners and holidays, and once to his grandmother's house where I learned how to fry tortillas. That was about as stereotypically Hispanic as it got—for the most part they were a quirkily Christian family who prayed a Shabbat prayer over their bread on Saturdays because Jesus was Jewish.

His mother read mostly as white, especially given her plain, Anglo-sounding name, and her white, lawyer husband. My friend described himself as looking “ambiguously ethnic.” He delighted when his high, flat cheekbones and the epicanthic folds around his eyes were read as Asian. He enjoyed being an enigma, he loved even a tenuous link to a culture that fascinated him long before he backpacked through Southeast Asia and studied in Japan. And so, although we once made tortillas with his grandmother, Latino was just one of the many things that some of their family was, and they all fit in just fine with the white, well-to-do families on Signal Mountain. My friend, his mother, and his youngest sister looked most obviously related, with a permanent tan and brown eyes so concentrated they were almost black, but class and geography and education and self-identification made Hispanic heritage something they could pick up or put down. Now you see it, now you don’t.



Benny reads as *other* in Tennessee in a way that even other people of color do not. He comes across as foreign. He breaks all the rules we have fixed in our minds. He is not poor. He speaks perfect English. He is over six generations American. His last name comes from Etxebarri, a Basque village in the region of Biscay, Spain. He has a college education in writing symphonies. And these things together makes him seem out of place here. He does not fit into Chattanooga’s economic and racial landscape. The city is changing, slowly, over time. But not yet to the point that he doesn’t turn heads. Not yet to the point that he is part of the scenery. In Chattanooga, where many of the state and region’s Latinos are not, simply seeing Benny around town is like a magic trick. Some unseen hand is making the invisible suddenly appear.

He is at the neighborhood gas station, Kanku’s to buy a six-pack for us to enjoy with dinner. It’s part of a chain run by an Asian Indian family in town, and since it’s right by the

university the manager always makes sure to stock a selection of craft beers along with the corporate lagers, the malt liquor, the forties of Colt 45 and Olde English 800, King Cobra, and Jeremiah Weed. This particular Kanku's franchise sits not only next to the university dorms, but also in between Main Street, which is heavily gentrified and expensive, and East Chattanooga, which is still mostly low-income and dominated by Section 8 housing. Look at a current real estate map while scouting out local home prices and you'll still see the borders once drawn in the redlining days. Only some things have changed.

One of the most significant differences, however, is that Main Street used to be like East Chattanooga, with a lot of cheap housing, abandoned industrial properties, derelict railroad facilities and warehouses, and few businesses besides package stores, a gay bar, the carnicerías. Even though the rents have gone up and expensive condos have gone in, the affluent new residents haven't been able to oust the old chicken processing plant on the edge of the neighborhood. It smells bad most of the time, despite expensive measures the managers have taken to mask the smell. White feathers blow down Main Street and into the queso appetizers of diners who make the mistake of sitting outside at the Mexican restaurant across the street from the plant. It's bad for Main Street's new reputation as a trendy destination, but it's good for the many workers the plant employs. They aren't paid well, and the work is grueling, disgusting, and dangerous, but it's work in a town where manufacturing jobs have been dwindling since the 1980s. It's work where the newly subsidized job creators insist on four year degrees for entry level positions.

Because of Kanku's geographic position, it's a rare point of intersection for Chattanooga's somewhat segregated populations. It not only has a beer cave full of newly distributed IPAs and seasonals and porters, it has a hot bar with fresh fried chicken, potato

wedges, and large pickle spears. You can buy cat food, a marijuana bowl “for tobacco use only,” a pack of cloves, orange juice, or some basic groceries. Everyone stops here for gas—the owner chose the location well. The workers from the chicken plant, so often made invisible by odd hours, are hard to miss here. They come in still wearing sterile blue booties made of disposable polypropylene, the face masks, the hair nets, the thick coats and gloves. The construction workers, too, are brightly visible, rolling up in reflective orange vests and thick, tan canvas pants, their brown boots heavy and dragging their feet down to the sidewalk.

“Do you speak English?” Benny is walking in when a Hispanic man stops him to ask this question. Benny nods. “Ok. So do you know where the nearest liquor store is?” Benny gives him directions, though there’s nothing nearby, nothing you could reach quickly on foot. He tells me about this later. It could be an innocent question, but Benny is struck by the fact that the man singled him out to ask the question, that he sought out the most familiar face. He wonders about the assumption that he might not speak English, that he would know the liquor stores, that he is familiar with the routes of blue collar Chattanoogaans who live in food deserts more plush with package stores and sidewalk barbecue than anything with a produce section. No matter who is looking, he sticks out.



In Dallas, Benny is one of many—one of many people who don’t dress to impress, one of many people who have a T-shirt shaped tan because they’ve spent time in the unflinching sun, one of many people who drive dented second hand cars, one of many people who live in blue-collar neighborhoods like Oak Cliff where *tejanos* songs pour out of car radios and the storefronts are full of *quinceañera* dresses and *piñatas*. He’s one of many people who, as he puts it, look Mexican. The bartender doesn’t see him, because he’s just one more. He is a tree in a

forest. He is another Mexican man in a good suit taking his girlfriend out for a steak. He is what his mother calls him: another American mutt. It's a different kind of invisibility that defined his life in Texas. The degree to which he sticks out depends on the neighborhood he, that we, are in.

Whether our presence is read as a positive or a negative depends on the place. In Oak Cliff I am the unfamiliar face, along with my blond, leggy future sister-in-law. In Bishop Arts, we're just like everyone else, unnoticed, unspecial. In Uptown, at the bougie beer garden, Benny asks me if I notice anything. I reply that the only other Hispanic people I see are staff—none are there as customers. A few minutes later, a beautiful black woman walks by, dressed in skinny jeans and a plaid button-down I remember seeing on the J-Crew website. She is casual, chic, effortless, expensive. Her hair is natural, but coiffed. She's with her handsome, fashionable boyfriend, possibly of Middle Eastern descent, who is very proud of her. You can tell by the way he drapes his arm around her, the way he is looking out at the other customers, grinning from ear to ear. His body language is open, his chest broad and forward, there's a little swagger to his hips. Benny comments to me that the way this man is walking with his girl is the way he feels when he walks down the street with me.

The girl's body language is different. She draws a little inward. She looks nervous, like she's afraid someone else will think she's doing something wrong. It's a learned caution. Her eyes glance around nervously on their way out, though she tries to play it down, and she seems to want to leave the bar quickly. Benny notices too, and speculates that she's the one from Dallas, the one who knows this bar and its clientele. That her boyfriend is the one who doesn't. That she's worried they'll catch flack, that they'll be treated as bad or worse than we will be later when we go to the bar to close our tab.



In the Chicago suburbs at Christmastime, we go to the grocery store to buy jar after jar of hot Italian giardiniera to take home with us to Tennessee. I marvel at the aisle dedicated just to Polish, Bulgarian, and Hungarian foods, their labels spangled with cyrillic letters and strings of consonants, the recipes and ingredients unfamiliar. I tell Benny on the drive home that as exciting as these dips and soups packets and condiments are to me, they are someone else's everyday, something quotidian. I tell Benny about the Senegalese and Scottish origins of fried chicken and biscuits that met in antebellum kitchens, the way that Southern food is in so many ways an unlikely story— collision as comfort food, a simple mess of vittles born out of violence.

When we return to the house, Benny's mother is making tamales, a Christmas tradition. She learned from her grandmother, who learned from her mother, and so on. It has been fifteen years since Benny helped to make the tamales, but he is quick to remember how to fold the corn husks at the bottom to keep the dough together and the filling from falling out. We work together around the kitchen table, smoothing *masa* on pale corn husks with the back of weighty spoons, Benny scooping small portions of beef and *cumino* and slow-cooked soft chiles into the center of each corn husk fan as we pass them to him. We make a whole pot full, and will bring dozens home with us, frozen in Tupperware, tucked into the center of our suitcase.

I get to know his mother in the kitchen, talking as I help her chop vegetables and thaw meat for our actual Christmas dinner of ham and sweet potatoes, Parker rolls and pie. She laughs with her husband, who is not Benny's father, about when she first taught him to spread the *masa* on the husk for the tamales. In another marriage, when she shared Benny's Spanish last name, when she lived in Texas, she lived another life. Here in Chicago, where winter has lightened her skin and she shares an Anglo last name with her husband, and she lives in a suburb filled with every face, she is what she has always wanted to be, for her children to be—just another

American. We pass the butter and the salt. Tonight we do not have to wait for a long time at the register. We open another bottle of wine, and pour generously into one another's glasses.

Tonight we are family. Tonight we do not have to pay for anyone's curiosity.

DOWNSTREAM IN HIGHLAND PARK

My mother's eyes glistened wetly at us for months after Benny came to Chattanooga. Winter is cold and wet in Tennessee, without the pleasure of snow. It came early that year, cutting fall short just after we unpacked Benny's things and slid his piano into its new place, under the north west window in the back room. After Christmas it began to rain. It wouldn't stop falling. Our house is in a neighborhood called Highland Park, built a hundred years ago so it would be out of reach of the Tennessee River's then-regular floods. Still, we found ourselves with a basement full of five feet of water. The hot water heater, ironically enough, drowned. That wet look from my mother slowly seems to fill up our lives the same way. We weren't sure what the casualties might be.

The weekly family dinners I had hoped for seemed to wash out, as did the words between us. I began to speak defensively, an octave higher, like I did as a child. I felt myself cracking and slipping, the way I worried the dirt walls of the basement would but never did. I start to feel myself fill up with my own damp feelings. All my old insecurities begin to leak, that only child need to please and perfect. Benny could do all kinds of work. He rebuilt the ball joint of our old, battered truck with a set of borrowed wrenches. He sifted through our compost, plucking out the seeds of jalapenos, butternut squash, apples, turmeric, and ginger, to plant in pots he carefully arranged in the back bathtub of our house. He helped friends and neighbors with their brakes, with cracked ceilings, by hand-building raised garden beds. But he did not have the tools or materials or skill to stop me up. These gaps existed before him, these old questions of what kind of woman to be.

Over the summer, the night before a family trip to the beach, I cracked. The tears leaked. I felt myself finally break and the feelings roil and eddy in me, and no one was out of reach, in Highland Park or otherwise. I caused a scene and retreated home. My father came to check on me, and I told him about my mother's moist eyes and floating face, the flooded lines of communication.

"I don't think she'll be happy for us when we get engaged," I tell him.

Or was it if. If we get engaged.

Even then, I letting information slip across the dam between us in small enough amounts that it wouldn't sweep everyone away. I held back the happiness we feel as if it were a destructive thing. Perhaps we sandbagged my mother's feelings, never giving her the opportunity let loose all those fears she carried in her throat and eyes for months. Maybe I thought I would wash away under the weight of them. Perhaps she was drowning.



A week before I met Benny, I took a trip to Los Angeles for the first time. One night, I drove from the Pacific Coast down Sunset to Echo Park, the fog chasing me the whole way. And that felt like a metaphor for my experience in LA, chased by a grim fog of everything that had happened up to that point. Another night, I waded into the Pacific near Venice Beach with all my clothes on, under the light of the moon. I felt torn between the desire to go out further into that warm and rippling water, and the knowledge that if I did I wasn't certain to come back. I felt the weight of the tide tug at my legs, and it was a peaceful kind of terror. That was when I knew I needed to choose the things I did not think I could have. That was when I knew it was not only alright, but necessary, to admit my own thirst.

There were many things I wanted. To travel. To write. To screw. I had been alone for two years, working hard, so hard, to be the kind of woman who did not mind being alone. I put in my hours in the nice office with the marble floors and paid for the things I needed, but I had neglected nearly everything beyond the border of necessity. I wanted to read books and hold cats and pierce my nose. I wanted to see Egypt, to write essays, to drink dry wine, to feel again the exquisite blend of emotion brought on by certain songs listened to on certain nights in bed. I wanted to feel hands on my body that would pull at me like the centrifugal force that hugs and hums when your truck hits a hard mountain curve at high speeds. It was no longer sustainable to go along with what was expected. I had run dry on the pursuit of the good title on the resume, the big name in town, the expensive four inch heels, the promise I would be a bridesmaid in a relative's wedding, the occasional hour massage.

And then, when I knew nothing more than the fresh sensation of my own honest want, I met Benny, who promised me nothing more than peace of mind. Over pizza and whiskey we talked about the Mayan ruins he had seen rising out of the jungles of southern Mexico, the things he had built with his hands, the terrestrial secrets of nighttime in the Colorado back country. For the first time, instead of waiting for the levee to break once again, for the waters to rise up to my neck and pull me further from shore, instead of being pushed and pulled by the moon and my own saturated body, I felt my toes drag against solid ground. There was grit there, and solidity.

A month later, we were backpacking in a place viscerally named Fiery Gizzard when I fell off a cliff on our way back to camp. I felt the pull not of an eager, questioning tide, but the brute force of gravity, and the texture of rock and roots and a rain of gravel. I felt my bone work against the earth, and I felt his hands catch me. He pulled me back up to the trail, now a story up

from where I'd landed. He walked me down to the creek at the bottom of the gorge and plunged my swelling arm into that cold, crackling mountain water, even as our feet stayed on the shore.



Nine months after the basement flooded, we still don't have hot water. We could have replaced the heater if we'd forgone a few adventures, but we wanted to explore together, to learn about one another by learning new streets and alleys, by driving unfamiliar backroads in rented cars. We rolled in to New Orleans at midnight chased by swamp fog fumbling into the city off the bayous. We pulled up to a neighborhood dive with strong sazeracs and a big brass funk band, and we wandered along the levees for nearly a week. On our way out of town we drove through the Ninth Ward and looked at what all that water had done, and what was left ten years later. Benny climbed through an abandoned house still standing and there were all the old toys and relics of some other life laid out exactly where they'd been left.

We drove through what was once slave country to Texas, and stopped on the side of the road to touch the broken stalks of sugarcane fields. We camped on the edge of Toledo Bend on the border between Louisiana and Texas and tried to catch fish. In Dallas, the Trinity River was wet and glistening under the Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge and Woodall Rodgers Freeway span, engorged from storm cells we dodged as we drove west and north. Everywhere we went, the water was safely contained behind concrete walls and dredged channels, in appropriate quantities, in appropriate places. A muted threat, a necessary reservoir.



Benny and I like to play a game called Where to Live in the Anthropocene. We look at projections of temperature and sea level rises, shifts in weather patterns, property values, the laws on the books about living off grid. We are trying to decide where we should settle down.

We discuss this more than any other aspect of the future, more than our wedding colors or the names of our hypothetical children. We know these things may or may not happen, will take forms that are dependent on factors we can't study. We focus on the future we can forecast. After knocking back a few beers and examining topographical maps, reading think pieces, pursuing scientific studies, we make a list of places where we could buy land and fill it with dogs, goats, aging relatives, possible babies. These places promise somewhere to grow old, they give us a shape to pour our dreams into. The specifics of geography matter little except in what they convey; geography has become the language through which we learn about one another.



Thirty thousand feet above West Texas there are small towns that look like constellations, with long straight roads lined in lights that end in a dipper of clustered buildings and indoor running water. Flying over the mountains between lush coastal California and the desert, on the way home from a trip to Hawaii and San Diego, I think about sharp divides. I think about the ones you can see and the ones you can't.

We hop over the Mississippi at dusk between San Antonio and Atlanta, so quick for something so large, and from above you can see all the mud in the water, and suddenly the land is lush and green and winding, without the logic to it of those desert star towns and geometric roads. Benny touches my arm and points out the window at what must be rural Alabama.

"It's beautiful," he says, trying to guess what I'm thinking.

"No, it's not." I tell him.

I've been silently crying off and on since our flight left San Diego.

Down below, in all that verdant disorder and winding water and streaked roads, I don't see an oasis. I see an impressionistic painting of a messy history. I cry, because this is the place

where just a couple weeks ago Benny couldn't buy a bottle of soda without the clerk at the gas station leading him to the kitchen aisle and called him "Espan-cholo" in a mock Mexican accent. I cry, because when we travel I don't have to worry about finding myself startled deer still by some all-too familiar face. I cry over a bad few years, as if returning to this place means returning to that time, waiting for something to wash me away.



We make plans. A few weeks ago the parishes around Baton Rouge flooded for the first time in hundreds of years. Cedar Rapids is verging on a sequel to the five hundred year flood of 2008. Here, our garden is dry. We water it every day from the garden hose. My mother's eyes are slowly draining, as she sees that our work has never stopped, that this new era abides. September is as steadily hot and sunny as last year's October was cold and searing. The weather is tidal, as is calamity. You can know a place intimately, as intimately as the topography of your own body, and it can be rendered unrecognizable by even the faintest shimmer of water covering the land. You can try to study where the glacier will slide, and when it will melt, but in the end it is wiser to count on the flood than to rely on the levee. There are no safe places to pick. What heals may also hurt. Our tongues work the phrase "Lord willing and the creek don't rise." We learn to float, to read the level of the water and the weight of the clouds. We learn to practice the art of thirst.

GROWING UP IN THE GARDENS OF THE DEAD

Pop an old compact disc from 2003 in the computer and you'll find the few photos I took in high school that survived, saved at an impossibly small resolution. I didn't know back then how to preserve and embalm all these memories to go the distance and I didn't know my apartment would be robbed in 2012, taking the backups and half the CDs. But there they are—the snaps of my best friend and I lying pale in neat in board shorts and baggy t-shirts on the large sarcophaguses in the Confederate cemetery downtown, our thin arms crossed over our chests, doing out best impression of medieval saints and reliquaries. We'd gone to the cemetery for a picnic. We packed Little Debbie snack cakes and Swedish Fish and chips—all our favorite teenage treats—and strewed them about on the tombstones as if we were making an altar for El Dia Del Los Muertos. But it wasn't a game and it wasn't a ritual. We just wanted somewhere outside our bedrooms where we could be alone.

I'd been going to the Confederate Cemetery since I was a child, because it sat across from the building at the university where my father had his office. My mother and I would walk through it sometimes, waiting for him to get out of class. I liked it because it has a huge stone entrance, with two crenelated towers on either side of an iron gate. It looked like the old English castles in the books I read, like the rooks on my father's chessboard.

Ten years later it was still there for an adolescent escape from the all-girls prep school my friends and I attended. The school sat high on a bluff overlooking the river, three buildings arranged around a central courtyard, protecting us from all the bad things they said were out there, from all the bad things our bodies were sure to invite. We were hundreds of princesses in pleated cotton uniforms waiting in a keep, waiting for graduation to break those four years like

summer heat or a spell, waiting for something to prick us and let us know we were alive. My friend and I, we dyed each other's hair in the gym bathroom and walked to the downtown library after school, and we were always on the lookout for a place to just kick it. To be ourselves, and not think about our bodies, or our parents, or the things we heard in the news. We wandered all over the city trying to find private places to read, anywhere that had no eyes on us. We wanted to be invisible, to only be seen by our own invitation. Our bodies felt like diaries with small locks and covers that read "for your eyes only." We didn't want to do anything bad, though I suppose it looked like we were up to something. We just wanted to breathe. The Cemetery was the best place we found. We were the rulers of our own quiet kingdom, two queens on the loose. Playing dead on the coffins and splaying out by the tombstones makes sense when you're fifteen and feel like Persephone.



I dropped out of that school at sixteen. I think my parents finally recognized that it was lose the school or lose me. On my first day of home schooling, my mother took me to work with her. She didn't know what else to do. We went to lunch at a new restaurant overlooking Forest Hills Cemetery. The big stone mausoleums were nicer than my parents' house, a dilapidated little ranch in an unfashionable post-war suburb a few miles from my old school. The cemetery is all manicured grass and big trees, situated on lush hills at the foot of Lookout Mountain, where a big Civil War battle was fought and where later the old blue bloods and captains of industry built their grand homes on the brow. They left those houses for these mausoleums of enduring granite, the kind of stone that well-to-do owners of lofts and renovated houses now measure and polish for their kitchen countertops. The surnames on these tombstones were the same as those of my former classmates. The surnames were the ones on buildings all over town, names given to all

the big philanthropic funds and scholarships in the area. The kind that made it possible for my parents to send me to private schools. It was all laid out right there, a map of my life and others', a map of how things had been and would be. A city in miniature. A place with eyes.



At seventeen, I was alone all the time, in small spaces. I haunted my own bedroom and the cab of my truck. I made mix CDs and read endless books. At night I stayed up late watching old classic movies— *Citizen Kane*, *Sunset Boulevard*. I drank Black Berry Manischewitz sometimes, if I could scrounge it up. I fantasized about sneaking out to the Waffle House a mile or so down the street. It would have been easy to reach. There were friends I could call who were experts in sneaking out, and moonlit streets I could wander, but it didn't seem meaningfully different to be bored at night than in the daytime. It didn't seem to matter if you were alone on Linden Hall Drive at midnight or noon. Once, I unlatched the side door and walked to the end of the driveway. I knew I could push the truck down the street before I started it, or just set out on foot, but it was less that I really wanted to go and more that I wanted to be the sort of person who would.

Some evenings around dusk I'd get a ride to Chattanooga Memorial Park. It's better known as the graveyard with a duck pond, and used to be known for a particular stone arch with some serious paranormal activity. Memorial Park is the kind of old garden cemetery designed, at the turn of the last century, to be both a cemetery and a city park. A hundred years ago it would be nothing to come here during the day to read or relax, picnic, write letters, perhaps pet a little. But ten years or so ago, it was just kids like me trying to find somewhere to be on the Southern nights when the air feels too close to stay indoors, when everything gets to be too much. I wish I could tell you about the fragrance of bougainvillea or the slant of streetlights between the tree

leaves— something to set the mood— but the truth is my focus was narrowed on this guy named Greg’s knee, the way his thermals poked through the hole in his jeans. The way he propped his leg up against the dash like he was lounging on the sofa instead of sitting in a car. The way he wore flannel like Kurt Cobain. The way he let me sit there with him in the passenger seat. The way it felt good, for once, to be seen. Or if not exactly seen, to be present. To be somewhere.

We were there ostensibly to go ghost hunting. Most nights, the only paranormal activity is the boys’ uncanny ability to turn to any local classic rock radio station in time to catch a track from *Frampton Comes Alive*. Over and over, though, we came back to the haunted arch, which sat towards the back of the cemetery, with two cement steps leading up to it from the road. It was a stand alone thing, unattached to any mausoleum or building, and supposedly a figure in a black cloak would walk up the steps and through the arch only to reappear at the bottom and repeat the process. Sometimes Greg’s friend Nathan would join us, and then he’d ride shotgun. His bloom of red hair looked not unlike Frampton or Robert Plant. They smoked cigarettes and talked about nothing, but it was the kind of nothing that guys talk about and girls don’t. This interested me, but I also waited eagerly for spaces of silence. I sat there waiting for one of them to put his hand on my thigh, to try to cop a feel, to be as aware of my body in that car as I was, thinking carefully about how to arrange myself on the seat without appearing to try.

I was a couple years too young for them and they were thirty years late for these albums, and we were all a hundred years off from whoever it is that died, yet we kept coming back to that arch. Like the ghost, I returned again and again only to disappear into nothing. I was waiting to come alive like Frampton, like whoever the ghost had been once was. I was waiting for something to start, and it never occurred to me once that hanging out in cemeteries at night was a funny place to look for a beginning. Everyone’s timing was off, and no one cared, because this is

what there was to do right then. And still, I felt haunted for years by everything I wanted to have happen back there that never did.



The thing about the South is that it isn't very hard to find cemeteries, even if you aren't looking. They're scattered all around, and the cities and suburbs have kind of sprawled into what used to be rural family plots tucked out of the way on old farms and plantations. Once, in Dade County, Florida, my great uncle Bill took us to a little old graveyard fenced in wrought iron where some of our ancestors are buried, dating back to the 1800s. Spanish moss was dripping off all the huge old oaks, and it looks as gothic as you'd want a Southern cemetery to be, the mosquitos singing sad songs in your ear. But they aren't all as atmospheric as that. There's the tiny Confederate cemetery off I-75 just outside of Chattanooga, tucked between a motel, a Harley Davidson dealership, and a used bookstore. There's the Coon Dog cemetery on the way to Memphis, which has become a roadside quirk. There's many more I don't know the names of, peeking at you as you drive down the old highways and backroads, overlooking Walmarts and sports equipment stores and the Dollar General, cemeteries still filled with colorful plastic flowers and tchotckes, evidence of memory and of love.

There's the old Lusk family plot at Prentice Cooper State Park. My cousin commented on it as we were hiking Suck Creek Mountain. It was surprising to cross some old path we didn't know about, to be confronted with the evidence of old geographies and patterns of life that once routed along this land differently, before we preserved land in this way, before being outdoors was a hobby, before hiking was not a primary mode of transportation. "How do you get a spot there?" he asked. The dates on the stones were as recent as the past twenty years. There were spaces for people yet to die. "You know someone, I guess," I told him. What I did not say is that

you *belong*. The way my grandmothers came back to the South in small urns. They each left in their twenties and later started married lives up north. The way my mother's mother rests on a hill in Alabama behind a gate marked "Drake." The way that my father's mother only wanted to go home to Dade County when it came time for her to die.



Cemeteries are built, in part, on the promise of miracles. Of resurrection. Of the preservation of the body. The South is unlikely to rise again, but supposedly the dead one day will. The battles of the Civil War gave undertakers cause to perfect their embalming techniques to ensure each soldier's remains returned home relatively in tact. I learned to ride my bicycle at Chickamauga Battlefield, my training wheels carving twin trails in the dust. The battlefield had, sometime between the two Roosevelt presidencies, found new life as a park for families and a site for field trips. The body of that place was itself preserved. I've become someone new so many times since then, a series of selves with the same history trailing behind them. I wonder what this place, this city, these southern states will become next. I know how precarious it can be to wait on miracles.



Quite by accident, I have a history of living near funeral homes. My dorm room in college was near the old J. Avery Bryan Funeral Home. It was close enough that my roommates and I would tell each other ghost stories to explain the strange noises made by the aging, poorly maintained pipes and HVAC systems in our apartment. A few years later, I purchased a home across the street from the Franklin-Strickland Funeral Home, which handled football star Reggie White's service. Once, the building had once been a grocery store. Then it was a struggling

family business in a neighborhood that qualifies as a food desert. Now it's corporate owned, with a fleet of sleek hearses in different stately colors.

I bought the house after a few bad years of failed relationships and failed jobs and dark moods. I needed somewhere I would not feel small, where I would not have to fold up my feelings so they could fit in the glovebox of a sedan, or in my pocket on a walk. I wanted a place to be alone, and to not be seen. I wanted a place to wait for miracles. I painted the walls of the house in dark, soothing grays and collected many soft, warm blankets. I nourished myself with bowls of pasta and rinds of cheese and stored my hurt in the house's deep closets. When I graduated from college three years earlier, I could not have imagined the way the world suddenly seemed to sour. Now there were things I needed to grieve, and I did it over glasses of wine and in the house's deep claw foot tub.

The funerals that take place at Franklin-Strickland are community events, and often the parking lot isn't big enough to hold all the cars. The mourners spill out in the streets, parallel parking in front of the nearby houses and walking in through the back door of the funeral home in their Sunday best. I would sit on the porch and smoke cigarettes, watching them, drinking coffee or a beer, trying to parse the rituals of loss. What did these people know that I didn't? They'd lost loved ones and acquaintances, but I'd lost myself in men many, many times, in jobs and institutions that didn't want me, in a sore, stuck feeling I couldn't shake. I felt like a cemetery myself, full of old relics and bones, unvisited and untended. I had preserved my body shoddily, but it was still there. I had the house, which at times felt a little like a tomb. It was a place to be still and wait.

Once, while in the back of the house, I heard loud shrieks and ran out front. A middle aged woman was keening by her car in the funeral home lot, doubled over with grief, surrounded

by fellow ladies in purples and navy blues and blacks. I retreated back into the house, unwilling to intrude, although I admired her ability to publicly grieve, to occupy a shared space with her sadness, to literally give voice to her pain. To be seen, fully seen, and not shrink back from all those eyes.



Eventually Chattanooga Memorial Park took down the arch. They were tired of kids coming by making a mess of the place. But it still doesn't seem like a bad way to have spent time, sitting there in the dark listening to all those old songs. I still recreate the experience when the mood strikes. Now I drive up the hill at the center of the National Cemetery, because you can see all of Chattanooga laid out before you in every direction. It's a place for you to see into the dark and divine secrets. You can watch the lights on top of the hospital blink at the helicopters carrying the gravely injured through the night, and the trucks pressing their brakes as they slide down Missionary Ridge into the city, and the yellow and white lights from the houses on the brow of Lookout Mountain. I like to talk to the people buried there, and imagine what they'd have to say about where I'm at.

I haven't taken many people up here. Only the special ones that stick around. I've taken my best friend from high school up here ten years in to our friendship, so we could listen to the CDs we burnt for one another back then, a different graveyard but the same old past time. I've brought Benny up here on bad days, so he can feel too all the stories stored there in the ground. Once, he handed me a flask of whiskey and told me to get out of the truck and lay on the hood. I took a sip and thought about the potential poses— a crash victim, the girl in the Whitesnake video, a swooning heroine. I arranged myself on the warm white metal like a medieval saint with my hands crossed over my heart. He gently revved the engine until it felt like my own

heart's beat. The heat of the combustion warmed me, and for a moment, it felt I was the blood and the dirt and the granite and the glass and all those bright lights were eyes on me. That the city and I were separate things which saw one another briefly through the dark, staring unblinking through all that ugliness and grace.

REFERENCES

- Alvarado, Beth. "Water in the Desert." 2015-10-15 2015. Print.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 2 ed: Aunt Lute Books, 1999.
- Baker, Sybil. "Reverse Migration." *The Critical Flame*. 10, Jan. 2016. Print.
- Barthes, Roland. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Vintage Classics: Macmillan, 1978. Print.
- Bascom, Tim. "Picturing the Personal Essay: A Visual Guide." *Creative Nonfiction* 49 (2013).
Web.
- Baudelaire, Charles. *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*. Trans. P.E. Charvet, Penguin Classics: CUP Archive, 1981. Print.
- Beard, Jo Ann. "The Fourth State of Matter." *The New Yorker*, 24 June 1996. Web.
- Biss, Eula. *Notes from No Man's Land: American Essays*. Greywolf Press, 2011. Print.
- Blackstone, Charles, and Jill Talbot. *The Art of Friction: Where (Non)Fictions Come Together*. University of Texas Press, 2009. Print.
- Briante, Susan. "Mother Is Marxist." *Guernica Magazine*, 1 March 2016. Web.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. Text Publishing Company, 2015. Print.
- Cote, Rachel Vorona. "I Thought I Could Just Be a Passenger." *The Rumpus*. 5 Nov. 2014. Web.
- Debord, Guy. *The Situationist International: Texts and Documents*. MIT Press, 2004. Print.
- . *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books, 1994. Print.
- Didion, Joan. *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Delta Book. 14 ed. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1968. Print.
- . "The Art of Nonfiction No. 1, Joan Didion." Interview by Hilton Als. *The Paris Review* 176 (2006). Web.
- D'Agata, John. "John D'agata Redefines the Essay." Interview by Susan Steinberg, *Electric Literature*, 14 July 2016. Web.
- Einstein, Sarah. "On the Nonfictional Nature of Nonfiction: Or yet Another Blog Post Claiming

- D'agata Gets It Wrong," Brevity's Nonfiction Blog. 18 May 2016. Web.
- Frank, Matthew Gavin. *The Mad Feast: An Ecstatic Tour through America's Food*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2015. Print.
- Higgins, Karrie. "State Lines." *Quarter After Eight* 23 (2005). Print.
- . "Strange Flowers." *The Manifest Station*, 2014. Web.
- . "The Bottle City of God." *The Cincinnati Review* 11.1 (2014). Print.
- Hollars, B.J. *Dispatches from the Drownings: Reporting the Fiction of Nonfiction*. UNM Press, 2014. Print.
- Hong Kingston, Maxine. *The Woman Warrior*. Vintage International: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010. Print.
- Howley, Kerry. "The Cage of You." *Granta Magazine* 132 (2015). Web.
- Huber, Sonya. *Opa Nobody*. University of Nebraska Press, 2008. Print.
- Jamison, Leslie. *The Empathy Exams*. Graywolf Press 2014. Print.
- Kauffman, Bill. *Dispatches from the Muckdog Gazette*. Macmillan, 2004. Print.
- Koestenbaum, Wayne. *My 1980s and Other Essays*. Macmillan, 2013. Print.
- Kramer, J. Kasper. "There Are No Good Muslims." *The Rumpus*, 26 June 2016. Web.
- Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe, and Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988. Print.
- Lauterbach, Ann. "On Flaws : Toward a Poetics of the Whole Fragment." *Theory & Event* 3.1 (1999). Print.
- Lopate, Phillip. *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. Anchor Books, 1995. Print.
- Maddux, Rachael. "Child Mortality." Paris Review Blog, 20 June 2013. Web.
- . "Other People's Churches." Paris Review Blog, 13 October 2011. Web.
- . "The Missing." *Pacific Standard*, 14 February 2015. Web.
- Majka, Sara. *Cities I've Never Lived In*. Macmillan, 2016. Print.

- Meeropol, Ellen. "Smoke Signals." *Guernica Daily*, 23 August 2016. Web.
- Menkedick, Sarah. "Narrative of Fragments." *The New Inquiry*, 3 July 2014. Web.
- de Montaigne, Michel. "The Essays of Montaigne, Volume 19." Project Gutenberg. Web.
- Moore, Dinty W. *Crafting the Personal Essay: A Guide for Writing and Publishing Creative Non-Fiction*. Writer's Digest Books, 2010. Print.
- Nelson, Maggie. *Bluets*. Wave Books, 2009. Print.
- . *The Argonauts*. Graywolf Press, 2015. Print.
- Nelson, Maggie, and Evan Lavender-Smith. "The Fragment as a Unit of Prose Composition." *Continent*, 1.3 (2011) 158-170. Print.
- O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009. Print.
- Phillips, Tom. *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*. Thames & Hudson, 2012. Print.
- Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Graywolf Press, 2014. Print.
- Salibian, E.C. "Review of: Immigrant Lessons." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2014. Web.
- Sardy, Marin. "Break My Body." *Guernica Daily*, 8 August 2016. Web.
- von Schiller, J.C. Friedrich. "Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man." *Literary and Philosophical Essays: French, German and Italian*. Ed. Eliot, Charles W. Bartleby.com ed. Vol. 32. The Harvard Classics. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909-14. Print.
- Schlegel, Friedrich. *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments*. Trans. Peter Firchow. The Lund Press, Minneapolis University of Minnesota, 1971.
- Schwartz, Ariane. "Sifting through the Textual Ruins of Antiquity: Fragment and Body in Montaigne's 'on Some Lines of Virgil'." Society for Classical Studies 147th Annual Meeting. 2016. Web.
- Sedley, David Louis. *Sublimity and Skepticism in Montaigne and Milton*. University of Michigan Press, 2005. Print.
- Seuss, Diane. "I Hoisted Them, Two Drug Dealers, I Guess That's What They Were." *Brevity* 50 (2015). Web.
- Smith, Patti. *M Train*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2015. Print.

- Sontag, Susan. "The Ideal Husband." Review of *Notebooks, 1935-42* by Albert Camus. *New York Review of Books*, 26 September 1963. Print.
- Stein, Leigh. *Land of Enchantment*. Plume, 2016. Print.
- . "The Rumpus Interview with Leigh Stein." Interview by Sarah Lyn Rogers. *The Rumpus*, 8 August 2016. Web.
- Suchenski, Richard. *Projections of Memory: Romanticism, Modernism, and the Aesthetics of Film*. Oxford University Press, 2016. Print.
- Sukrungruang, Ira. *Southside Buddhist: Essays*. University of Tampa Press, 2014. Print.
- . "The Wide Open Mouth." *Superstition Review* 6 (2016). Print.
- Talbot, Jill. "Mapping the Psyche: A Conversation between Jessica Hendry Nelson & Jill Talbot." Interview by Jessica Hendry Nelson. *Tin House*, 11 August 2015. Web.
- . *The Way We Weren't*. Soft Skull Press, 2015. Print.
- Tanehisa, Otabe. "Friedrich Schlegel and the Idea of Fragment: A Contribution to Romantic Aesthetics." *Aesthetics* 13:9 (2009). Print.
- Thomas, Abigail. *Safekeeping: Some True Stories from a Life*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011. Print.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Moments of Being*. A Harvest Book: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1985. Print.

VITA

Meghan O’Dea was born in Chapel Hill, North Carolina but spent her childhood in Chattanooga, Tennessee. She attended Girls Preparatory School until the end of her sophomore year, after which she home schooled for two years. She completed an internship in environmental stewardship at the Sequatchie Valley Institute, audited college classes at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga in literature, cinema, and art, and earned her GED. She attended college for one semester at Appalachian State University before transferring to UTC, where she earned a BA in history and a BA in English and American language and literature in 2010 and graduated Magna Cum Laude. She also completed two Departmental Honors Projects, one on the use of food as a weapon in the Cold War, and one on geography in the Victorian novel. After graduation, she started her career in technical writing, and went on to work as a copywriter, marketing strategist, communications director, and social media consultant for several Chattanooga-based companies. She began work on a Masters in English at UTC after years of corporate writing left her missing literature and wanting to expand her repertoire. She currently writes and edits full time, balancing her time between journalism and creative nonfiction.